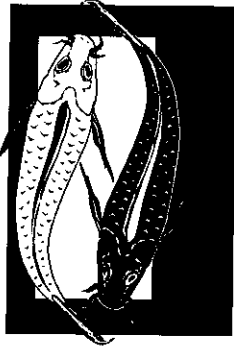


Reading 2.9 - Japan's Geography & Spiritual Heritage

2

IN THE BEGINNING



The geographical setting

Japan is an island nation that derives its identity through isolation from, yet proximity to, the Asian mainland. It is separated from Korea by the Straits of Tsushima, a distance of about 200 kilometres. This was clearly a major barrier to foreign contact in Japan's early history—compare it to the roughly 30 kilometres separating the UK from the European mainland.

This isolation has meant that cultural borrowing from the mainland occurred at a relatively even pace and foreign ideas were modified to suit local cultural practices. This is not to say that there were no periods of dramatic change, but there was never a military conquest by people from the mainland that might have fundamentally altered the path of Japanese civilisation. There was nothing like the Norman invasion of the British Isles. The readiness with which foreign ideas have been adopted has led to a widespread perception that Japan is simply a nation of borrowers. While this is partly true, Japanese culture also strongly reflects domestic characteristics.

Japan is not a particularly small country, being similar in size to Germany and one and a half times larger than the UK.

It comprises four main islands—Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu—and some 7000 smaller ones. They stretch about 3000 kilometres from north to south, with corresponding climatic differences. Because of its proximity to Siberia, Hokkaido has cold winters and heavy snowfalls, while the Ryūkyū islands in the south reach almost to Taiwan and are subtropical.

Topographically, Japan is very rugged, with favourable ecological niches which can sustain relatively large populations. The Kanto Plain, location of present-day Tokyo, is the largest of these. It is some ten times larger than either the Nobi Plain (Nagoya area) or the Kansai Plain (Osaka, Kyoto and Nara area), the other two major regions favourable to agriculture. More than half of the country is mountainous, reflecting its volcanic origins. Indeed, one of the best known symbols of Japan is the cone of Mt Fuji (inactive since 1707), the summit of which is about 3800 metres. The central Hida Range has many peaks above 2000 metres, so the interior of Japan contains a substantial natural barrier. Only about 14 per cent of the land is used for agriculture, the rest being covered with forests and fields, roads, water and cities.

Although we often think of Japan as being crowded, this is mostly because the population is crammed into less than 5 per cent of the total land area. In the face of the dramatic images that the media present of crowded urban conditions, we should remember that the high level of urbanisation is a phenomenon of the late nineteenth century and especially of the past 50 years. Finally, it is worth noting that the population of Japan is far from small. With about 126 million inhabitants, Japan has the seventh largest population in the world.

The landscape has naturally affected the way in which Japan was settled and how its culture developed. A rugged landscape, where people are separated by mountain ranges, rivers or bodies of water, leads to cultural diversity. It is not surprising that even today there remain significant regional dialects and variations in customs, as in the UK or Germany. Indeed, a theme running through Japanese history is the extent to which a central government has had problems keeping the

provinces under control. The development of powerful central institutions, which attempted to regulate even the minute details of people's lives, was a response to fear of regional autonomy and rebellion.

Japanese mythology

Every country has fictions as part of its nationalist baggage, whether it is the Wild West, forthright and hardy heroes of the revolution—or wise and stately kings. Japan is no different. The mythological origins of the Japanese state are complicated, convoluted, vague and full of differing interpretations, reflecting the different ethnic groups which eventually became the Japanese people.

In one brief version of Japanese folklore the world was a 'chaotic mass like an egg', and there was no division between heaven and earth. Gradually the purer part separated into heaven and the heavier, impure part became the earth. Between heaven and earth divine beings emerged. After a time an object resembling a reed shoot emerged between heaven and earth, which turned into a god. Seven more followed, the most important of whom were Izanagi and Izanami (Male Who Invites and Female Who Invites). They stood on the floating bridge of heaven and thrust a jewelled spear (clearly a phallic symbol, in keeping with early ideas of creation) down into the ocean. As they raised the spear some water dripped from it and congealed into an island, to which they descended. After a time they decided to become husband and wife and in due course Izanami gave birth to islands, seas, rivers, plants and trees. Izanagi himself gave birth to Amaterasu, the sun goddess, while purifying himself (washing one of his eyes). She was so strikingly beautiful that he decided to send her up the ladder to heaven to forever illuminate the earth. Again while purifying himself Izanagi gave birth to the moon god, Tsukiyomi. He was also sent to heaven, but had a disagreement with Amaterasu. She refused to look at Tsukiyomi, and so they were separated by day and night.

Part 2 : Spirituality in Japan

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Kannon Buddhist temple, Tokyo.

this area, called Kaya, there were a number of smaller independent 'principalities'. Japanese took advantage of the lack of a central power in the region to make frequent contact, and for more than a century this allowed for a substantial flow of Chinese and Korean ideas and trade goods (especially iron) through to Japan. Japan also provided soldiers in the fights between Kaya and the larger Korean kingdoms. In the seventh century, numbers of Japanese envoys (sometimes several hundred people at a time) were sent to China, often staying for many years, even decades, studying Chinese society, and bringing Chinese ideas back to Japan.

start → A very important development for Japan was the arrival of Buddhism from China through the Korean connection. The main factor entrenching Buddhism was the support of Shōtoku Taishi (Crown Prince Shōtoku) who ruled as regent 593–622). One may speculate on the reason for his advocacy; perhaps it was respect for China and a desire to appear 'civilised', admiration of the structure of Buddhism (as opposed to the

Image Not Available

*Cherry blossoms,
Shinjuku Gyōen,
Tokyo.*

relatively primitive structure of Shintō), or philosophical appreciation. Buddhism was certainly supported by a number of subsequent emperors, underscoring the point that major social changes in Japan usually occurred from the top down rather than as grassroots movements.

Buddhism had other impacts too, giving rise to the theme of the transience of life that runs through Japanese art and literature and underlies the near reverence placed on, for example, cherry blossoms. Lafcadio Hearn, an expatriate American living in Japan in the late nineteenth century, reflected this mood when he spoke of their ‘melancholy brevity’. In practical terms Buddhism was responsible for strictures against eating meat, and the shift to cremation from entombing the dead, signalling the end of the *kofun* period (though this

practice was common only among the elites at the time). Architecturally Buddhism has made a substantial impact on the Japanese landscape, not only in terms of statues and temples, but in structures where its ideals of harmony and balance predominate, such as in formal gardens.

The type of Buddhism which arrived in Japan was called Mahayana, or 'Greater Vehicle', which developed as it moved across China from India. The essential difference between this type and Theravada Buddhism (or 'Lesser Vehicle', found in, for example, Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka) is that the former holds that anyone can achieve eventual enlightenment through proper behaviour, and the emphasis is on accepting that followers will have varying degrees of understanding of life depending on their effort and karmic level. It puts more emphasis on the behaviour of individuals than on the role of the Buddhist clergy. In its journey across China, Mahayana Buddhism also picked up a range of Chinese characteristics and by the time it arrived in Japan it had a heaven and hell, numerous deities, and alternative interpretations of Buddhist teachings and ways to achieve enlightenment. These differing views led to the emergence of multiple sects, which have had varying historical impacts.

Buddhism brought an element of structure to Japanese religion. In spite of early secular frictions, reflecting the power of rival clans and other groups with vested interests, Shintō and Buddhism fitted together with relative ease, the two belief systems broadly complementing each other as they dealt with essentially different aspects of a person's life. Indeed, in later years it became common practice to build Buddhist temples on the grounds of Shintō shrines, and policies were worked out to allow the two religions to function together in philosophical terms. Philosophically, from the Buddhist point of view, the various Shintō spirits (*kami*) could be seen as *bodhi-sattvas* (sometimes loosely translated as 'saints'): those who had achieved enlightenment but who had chosen to stay on earth as guides to nirvana for others. Structurally, Buddhism was primarily concerned with moral behaviour, through the eightfold path to enlightenment (basically, rules to live by),

and with death (one example in Japan today is the Buddhist festival of *Bon*, a type of All Souls' Day).

Shintō, with its pantheon of gods (collectively referred to as *yaoyorozu no kami*, literally 'eight million deities', meaning too many to count) is concerned with day-to-day matters, mostly keeping various spirits onside and out of mischief. It is fundamentally an animistic religion, and there is no substantial ethical code implied, though it is grounded in the close relationship with the natural environment and the early communal life of Japanese. It is also concerned with natural disasters and seasonal cycles. Shintō shrines are often located on the tops of hills and mountains, in beautiful natural surroundings—places which are emotionally or spiritually stimulating. The connection with nature is also apparent in the fertility festivals and phallic cults associated with Shintōism. Purification rituals also play a large role, and this may be at least partly related to health issues, that is, to preventing the spread of disease. Certainly the daily bath plays a prominent role in the lives of Japanese people—there may be a connection here. The emperor is the titular head (or chief priest) of the Shintō religion and still performs ceremonies symbolic of planting and harvesting; it is partly his place within Shintōism that has accorded him sacred status throughout most of Japan's history.

It is generally accepted that Confucian ideas came to Japan early in the fifth century. It is a philosophy of moral behaviour and social stability, and would have found fertile soil in a society that already had a well-established hierarchical social order (it remained most powerful among the elites, however, until the advent of feudalism). It rarely came into conflict with Japanese Buddhism. Confucianism focuses on the duties of care, obedience and respect in relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife and so on, where the former must take proper care of the latter in return for obedience. In Japan it is usually said that the aspect of obedience, or loyalty, was emphasised more than care, or benevolence—a philosophical reinterpretation called Neo-Confucianism. In other words, respect for and loyalty to

Chinese character	安	以	加	多	奴	保
Original meaning	peace	take	add	many	slave	protect
Chinese pronunciation	<i>an</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>chia</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>nu</i>	<i>pao</i>
Katakana			カ	タ	ヌ	ホ
Hiragana	あ	い	か		ぬ	ほ
Phonetic value in Japanese	<i>a</i>	<i>i</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ta</i>	<i>nu</i>	<i>ho</i>

Examples of the derivation of Kana.

superiors was paramount. This philosophy has had an enormous impact on the way in which Japanese society is structured, from the family to the government to the workplace. The system of *senpai/kōhai* or senior/junior relationships, where the former are responsible for nurturing the latter, who in turn are obligated to learn and obey, as found in Japanese companies, appears to have its origins here. The same may be said of the value Japanese place on service. Confucianism is a theme which runs through Japanese society in many different ways, and has had an impact on the social system from early state development to feudal times through to the present. ←TOP

Politically, Japanese leaders accepted the Chinese concept of a centralised state, though the Japanese emperor rarely enjoyed the power accorded his Chinese counterpart. The complex Chinese bureaucratic system was also adopted to reinforce the power of the centre. Borrowed, too, was an intricate system of court ranks. The two together meant that one's rank in the bureaucracy was often determined by